Journal of Postcolonial Writing

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

ISSN: 1744-9855 (Print) 1744-9863 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjpw20

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To cite this article: William Mazzarella (2017) "A ground of more than necessary love": Magic and loss in the poetry of K.D. Katrak, Journal of Postcolonial Writing, 53:1-2, 52-68, DOI: 10.1080/17449855.2017.1290514

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2017.1290514

Published online: 01 Aug 2017.

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JOURNAL OF POSTCOLONIAL WRITING, 2017
VOL. 53, NOS. 1–2, 52–68
https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2017.1290514

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"A ground of more than necessary love": Magic and loss in the poetry of K.D. Katrak

William Mazzarella

Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago, Chicago, USA

ABSTRACT

Known primarily for his flamboyant and turbulent career in advertising, Kersy Katrak was also a remarkable poet. This article makes a case not only for retrieving Katrak's poetic voice, and situating it in relation to his poetic peers in the 1960s and 1970s, but also for exploring the deep relation between Katrak's publicity work and his poetic concerns. The article argues that the link may be drawn through Katrak's lifelong engagement with esoteric practice.

KEYWORDS

K.D. Katrak; advertising; magic; poetry; Mass Communications and Marketing (MCM)

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> [F]or as the occult axiom has it, "all revealing is re-veiling"
> (Ashish 1969, 82)

> Does the modern poet never relax?
> (Katrak 1966b, 34)

Kersy Katrak (1936–2007) has never quite gotten his due as a poet.[1] Shockingly underserved by criticism, he is, among his more canonical contemporaries, the "misjudged fellow" (Dubey, n.d.).[2] First published via the patronage of his early mentor Nissim Ezekiel, Katrak's "lush, provocative, and very readable" (Deshpande 1974, 14) poetry has, with its rare but persistent appearances in anthologies of Indian poetry in English, remained in a curious way at once unforgotten and unrecognized. Katrak's poetry lives on, now, in the occasional republication of a few pieces generally acknowledged to be "good". Such a fate is of course not unusual; one may often wish for more. But this kind of cherry-picking serves Katrak's oeuvre particularly badly, given how much of its singular power and pathos relies, precisely, on its arc *as* an oeuvre. Or, to name it more specifically: a 20-year chronicle of magic and loss.

So let's not beat around the bush. Whatever sins of commission or omission we may in the end have to pin on Katrak regarding the reception of his poetry, the bald fact is that, in more ways than one, mass publicity got in the way. For Kersy Katrak was also the flamboyant founder and head of Mass Communications and Marketing (MCM), the legendary advertising agency that, during its brief existence (1965–75), epitomized the brash confidence with which a generation of Indian advertising talent – the likes of Bal Mundkur, Nari Hira, Sylvester da Cunha, Nargis Wadia and Frank Simoes – broke away from the large transnational agencies and started independent operations.

CONTACT William Mazzarella mazzarel@uchicago.edu

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MCM made a splash with the sheer impact of its ads: layouts that were enormous by the standards of the time, featuring striking visuals and copy that was at once irreverent and sophisticated (Mazzarella 2003). But one might say that MCM's real product was MCM itself: a charismatic vitality, anchored in Katrak's expansive persona, which seemed to point beyond mere business considerations. For young advertising aspirants, MCM was, for a few years, quite simply *the place to be*. Mohammed Khan, Accounts Director at MCM at its very peak, remembers:

> you know, it used to be electric. There were all these problems and all that, but you walked into that agency and you could *feel* the electricity in the air. You could literally feel the charge. Because there was so much talent there – it was unbelievable. Unbelievable. (2010)

The excitement of the new agencies was in part a function of their scornful rejection of the staid, deskbound hierarchies of the corporate sector where, as fellow adman and Katrak's brother-in-law Da Cunha (2011) put it,

> you were judged by the kind of tea that you were served. Whether you were served in a cup, or in a cup with a tray, or with a tray with pouring things. Whether it had a napkin at the bottom of it. Did you share a cabin? Did you *have* a cabin? How large was your cabin?

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, according to Khan (1998), this kind of atmosphere pervaded the corporate advertising world as well: "the [big] agencies just looked like government-owned insurance companies. Clerks sitting and pushing files, know what I mean?" As much as Katrak and his peers had grown up in an elite anglophile cultural atmosphere and educational system, they nevertheless found direct inspiration for their rebellion in bad-boy New York agencies like Doyle Dane and Bernbach, standard-bearers of the then-ongoing Madison Avenue "creative revolution". Katrak's daughter Maia (2010) described the spirit of her father's generation: "We are not *babus* sitting in an office, taking dictation and doing what is necessary. We are *creative people*. We are playing with a very formidable set of skills".

This defiance and the world it conjured up were of course tremendously seductive: glamorous yet cultivated, living large yet somehow also in a bohemian way. Advertising may not quite have enjoyed the prestige of the established professions, but it had certainly been able to cultivate a much more intellectual – some would say downright pretentious – profile than its cousin, the film industry. Above all, it was vital and exciting. Compared to the dizzying class mobility of the US advertising world, the Bombay creative revolution remained, because of its anglophone focus, largely (but not exclusively) reliant on the products of a relatively small group of elite schools and colleges. But it did provide an environment in which Hindus, Muslims, Parsis and Christians routinely worked alongside each other, as well as a context in which some women were able to exercise a degree of power and influence that was unprecedented in Indian corporate and professional milieus. More generally, advertising offered a congenial albeit blisteringly competitive space for creative and ambitious types who had neither the temperament nor necessarily the unimpeachable academic record required for a more conventionally respectable career.

As theatre and advertising legend Padamsee (2010) described the awakening among Bombay's creative crowd: "When they saw Gerson [da Cunha] joining advertising – he was an actor – when they saw me joining advertising, Kersy joining advertising, they said: hey, this is wonderful! You can make money being creative? Lovely! Never thought of it".

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Long-term creative partnerships, such as that enjoyed at MCM and after by novelist-playwright Kiran Nagarkar and poet-artist Arun Kolatkar, emerged and thrived. But what made the new wave of agencies distinctive – and here MCM was paradigmatic – was the way in which they combined an idealistic, quasi-experimental approach to cultivating creative autonomy with a shockingly aggressive refusal to obey the gentlemen's agreements of the Bombay business establishment. Top creatives were compensated for the relentless pressure of work by unheard-of freedoms: as long as the job got done, Katrak couldn't care less whether his writers and art directors spent the day browsing in bookshops, lounging in cafés or watching movies. And top executives were reeled in with incomparably lavish salaries. Katrak's carefully cultivated charisma, the grandiosity of his lifestyle and his persona, were as tightly connected to his romantic vision of MCM as a kind of advertising Bauhaus as to the mercenary ruthlessness with which his agency pursued new business and seduced new talent.

At the same time, one might also say that the advertising world of this period offered a new lease of life and a new kind of cultural currency to an anglophone elite whose social relevance was, in the populist postcolonial political climate of the 1960s and 1970s, far from assured. The flipside of the confidence exuded by the Katrak generation was a profound anxiety about its ability to find a meaningful place in the mass dispensation of democratic populism. Frank Simoes, one of the most celebrated copywriters of the period, spoke no Indian language. His was admittedly an extreme case, but as Rakshit (2015), head of Avenues Advertising, observed:

> We were seen as a residue of the old colonial Raj. And we were conscious of it. But what they used to put down to our so-called arrogance, or our looking down on the vernacular types, was actually a great deal of insecurity. In terms of, you know, how do we get ourselves assimilated once we leave our cloistered environment?

In a sense, then, advertising emerged during these years in India as a parallel mode of mass aesthetic practice to – and also a refuge from – the swelling and increasingly complex currents of electoral democracy.

MCM's demise in 1975 as a result of financial mismanagement sent shock waves through the industry. Predictably, many of those who had been sidelined or trampled by the agency's rise did not bother to hide their schadenfreude. For Katrak, who plummeted, within a few short years, from celebrity to scapegoat, the collapse of MCM was nothing less than a personal trauma. There has been much speculation about the precise causes of the crash and about the extent and nature of Katrak's personal culpability. Unsurprisingly, Katrak's poetry contains only passing references to the ins and outs of his business dealings. But it does offer us a startlingly detailed examination of the visions, inspirations and enchantments that enabled Katrak's rise and likewise precipitated his fall.

Some in the industry say that MCM's shaky business foundations and short life makes it an unrepresentative, albeit dazzling, example of the creative transformation of Indian advertising. But I would like to suggest, through a reading of Katrak's poetry, that while his story may not be representative, it *is* in a profound sense exemplary. Both artists and advertising professionals would generally like us to believe that their intersection under the banner of advertising is little more than a conveniently pragmatic arrangement. Artists make money in advertising; advertising folk borrow the luster of artistic creativity while remaining soberly focused on the bottom line. But as we shall see, Katrak's poetry discloses,

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often quite harrowingly, resonances between the esoteric worlds of art and the exoteric worlds of mass publicity that are at once much deeper and much more volatile than such conventional wisdom would have us believe.[3]

During MCM's glory years, from the splendor of his ninth-floor apartment at Bakhtavar in South Bombay, Katrak himself insouciantly played the *mahabhogi* (the great enjoyer, the great non-renouncer) at a time of state-mandated austerity. Could such a man write good poetry? Should poets even *associate* with such a man? After all, hadn't W.H. Auden, in his poem "Under Which Lyre", drolly commanded: "Thou shalt not be on friendly terms / With guys in advertising firms" (Auden 1991, 335) and, in "In Memory of W.B. Yeats", opposed the self-sufficiency of poetry to the instrumentality of the corporate world: "For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives / In the valley of its making where executives / Would never want to tamper" (247)?[4]

Katrak would later recall an illustrative episode. In 1972, MCM was at the very peak of its reign, installed in apartments directly below Katrak's own residence. The great English and Marathi poet Arun Kolatkar was at that time also living in the building and working at the agency as an art director. Kolatkar brought Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, then the Beat-inspired enfant terrible of the English poetry scene, up to Katrak's flat for an introduction:

> Arvind looked and acted like a young Kropotkin.[5] I was then head of a large and successful advertising agency and had fixed notions on how such a man should live. The apartment reflected them: from a split-level, copper-inlaid front door, to a genuine "fake Moghul" cocktail table, flaunting the appropriate bottles. Arvind was civil enough till his eyes fell on that table and then he whitened and his gorge rose. After a few moments of deafening silence he asked his way to the pissoir and returned carrying a large bottle of Dettol,[6] which he placed effortlessly between the Bols schnapps and the Glenlivet 12. It was an act of Zen and in a strike captured the man. (Katrak 1982a, 39)

By the same token, one might say that Katrak's telling of the story, a decade after it happened and several years after the catastrophic collapse of MCM, captures something essential about *him*: his acute appreciation of the relation between a carefully staged mise en scène and the charismatic gesture that heightens it – potentiates it – by interrupting it.

Undoubtedly Katrak's irrepressible theatricality, his addiction to the grand gesture, was central to his considerable talent, his extraordinary charm and his professional downfall. Having been seduced as a teenager by the Eros/drama/poetry of Ebrahim Alkazi's production of T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* – a production that, significantly, featured the then Usha Amin, the woman that Katrak would eventually marry – Katrak himself went on to cut his teeth as an actor with Alkazi.[7] Although Katrak's time in the theater was relatively brief, throughout his life he played many roles: Parsi priest ordained at 12, poet, adman, householder, mystic, public intellectual, ashram devotee. But by his own admission, it was his decisive encounter with the theater that led Katrak to poetry. And it is in Katrak's poetry that we find a chronicle of the work through which he attempted to contain and to orchestrate the relation between all his faces: the work of magic.

What do I mean by this? The full unfolding of my claim is the project of this article, but a few preliminary definitions are in order. First, by "magic" I am not referring to showbiz illusionism but rather to the channeling of a potential that dwells alike in the literary, visual and theatrical arts, in public oratory and in genres of mass publicity like advertising. In a very preliminary way, we might say that "magic" is a name for

the charismatic power that seems to *bring alive* or to *actualize* the latent potentials that exist in the substance of our collective life. A magician is one who activates what Ashish (1969), Katrak's guru, fondly known as Ashishda,[8] called the powers of the middle region:

> They are intelligent, if scarcely self-conscious powers and can, under certain circumstances, be controlled by the will of man. The knowledge of such control is the basis of practical magic, which depends for its effectiveness on man's will acting on the inner or subtle aspect of form. (78)

We are perhaps conventionally more prepared to attribute such powers to mystics or artists than to advertising folk. But as the historian of religion Ioan Couliano points out, magic is at root an art of Eros, a science of susceptibilities. It asks: what makes one thing or person resonate with another? What can such potent resonances bring into – or keep out of – the world? We may think that magic is a thing of the past, or a preoccupation of those others that we prejudicially call primitive. But magic, argues Couliano ([1984] 1987), is eminently modern, a central feature of the mass mediated societies in which we live. Based on

> deep knowledge of personal and collective erotic impulses […] magic is primarily directed at the human imagination, in which it attempts to create lasting impressions. The magician of the Renaissance is both psychoanalyst and prophet as well as the precursor of modern professions such as director of public relations, propagandist, spy, politician, censor, director of mass communication media, and publicity agent. (xviii)

The magician's currency is charisma; his work hovers amorally between world making and manipulation.

Katrak's poetry is studded with the esoteric symbologies of Tantra, alchemy, mythology and astrology. Literary critic King (2001) passes over the oceans that open up here with a cursory reference to the "Tantric-influenced mysticism" that, he believes, increasingly diverted Katrak from the discipline and economy of his early collections (33). It would be easy to gain the impression that the trajectory of Katrak's poetry is a journey inward, away from his outer life, not least his work in advertising.

The problem with such an interpretation is not that it overestimates the place of the esoteric in Katrak's poetry. Nor is it enough simply to say that Katrak's exoteric engagement with advertising meant, during the time of his greatest poetic energy, far more to him than simply a means of making money. Some say that Katrak's preoccupation with advertising gradually drew him away from poetry. That is manifestly not the case. If anything, as Katrak's complex entanglement in the role of advertising magus deepened, his poetry became an ever more important site of self-interrogation and self-dramatization. The danger here is that, by opposing Katrak's advertising life to his poetic pursuits, we will miss the orienting principle of Katrak's quest in all its guises, which may best be summed up in the form of the ancient Hermetic formula of occult correspondence: as above, so below. Daruwalla (2008) rightly remarked in *The Hindu* that Katrak's poetry "blends the serious with the laconic and comic, the spirit with the sexual" (para. 1).

As we shall see, the ecstasy as well as the agony that infuses Katrak's poetry has to do with, precisely, his ongoing struggles to bring the esoteric and the exoteric dimensions of his life into alignment by means of what, again, I can only call magic. How little this has been generally understood, how completely the real desperation of this struggle has been missed, is encapsulated in King's oddly blithe description of Katrak's final collection, *Purgatory:*

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Songs from the Holy Planet (Katrak 1984) – written during Katrak's four years of exile at the Mirtola ashram after the traumatic collapse of MCM – as being about "the fun of 'The Way'" (2001, 108). Jussawalla (2015) puts it altogether more starkly and, I think, accurately when he observes that, by the time of *Purgatory*, Katrak was writing as if to stay sane.

But why such desperation? I've invoked magic but I've also mentioned loss. Taken as a whole, the arc of Katrak's poetry outlines something like a myth image: a man undone by his own magic. Characteristically, Katrak often seems to be courting such an interpretation by dramatizing his own struggle; one of the most palpable and recurrent features of Katrak's poetry is its self-conscious theatricality. In part this is a matter of its mode of address. Katrak frequently adopts a declamatory tone as if ritually summoning up his audience in the act of utterance. But in a more fundamental sense, Katrak is, in his poetry, constantly staging himself – ironically, defiantly, sometimes heroically.

Such grand theatricality sat awkwardly with the downbeat tone expected of a new Indian poet of the post-Ezekiel era, the "missing person" of Jussawalla's (1976) coinage, who often expressed even rage as a kind of detachment: "You're your country's lost property / with no office to claim you back" (15). English-language poets in postcolonial India found themselves, in Chaudhuri's (2008) words, "marginal to the larger, and solemn, task of nation-building" (224; see also Zecchini 2014) and, as Thayil (2008) notes, constantly "held accountable for nothing less than a failure of national consciousness" (xi). Guiltiest of all were the members of that fraction who, like Katrak, might feel moved to declare: "But dammit, English (of a kind) *is* my mother-tongue" (Katrak quoted in Lal 1969b, 242).

In the ostensibly socialist postcolonial climate of the 1960s and 1970s, Indians working in advertising were themselves frequently, although for different reasons, the targets of similar accusations. The consumerist display of advertising in a new nation struggling with mass poverty seemed, to many, both ethically and aesthetically distasteful. For all his visibility Katrak was, one might say, a missing person twice over, once along with his poet peers vis-à-vis the struggles of the new nation, and again as a markedly flamboyant adman vis-à-vis the struggles of the Indian poet writing in English.

Ezekiel's quietly quotidian irony, announced by his first collection in 1951, marked a decisive break with the "blurred and rubbery sentiments", the heaving romanticism of much earlier Indian poetry in English (Lal 1969a, x). As Ezekiel himself was to remark in an ambivalent review of Katrak's (1969a) first volume, *A Journal of the Way*:

> The noble thoughts, the high emotions, the sophisticated acquaintance with the themes of literature and art, these tempt the poet to ambitious flights of imagination. […] Vague immensities betray; real and relevant happenings in one's life, fully grasped and plainly described (plainly does not mean barely), have their poetic power. (Ezekiel, 1969)

The poets to whom Ezekiel was in varying degrees a mentor – Katrak included –generally shared his preference for the starkly intimate detail over any explicit participation in the pathos of nationalism. But by the end of the 1960s and the early 1970s, the early collective effervescence of Independence had both waned and splintered. Gyan Prakash (2010) describes a Bombay that in many ways crystallized a nationwide sense of crisis: "Collapsing infrastructure and municipal dysfunction, rising crime statistics, exposés of corruption, political and economic scandals, strikes and lockouts in mills, and simmering unrest and outbreaks of political violence" (240).

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Katrak's poetry is, on the whole, even less concerned with what we might recognize as "public life" or "current affairs" than that of his peers. In a rare direct invocation of politics in the context of poetry, Katrak would, in the early 1980s, approvingly cite Keki Daruwalla's use of an epigraph by Wallace Stevens – "It is equal to living in a tragic land/To live in a tragic time" – and remark: "The quotation itself defines *what* I mean by political. There is no party politics here nor any ideological credo. It is rather the *political* awareness of a tragic time in a tragic land" (Katrak 1982b, 11; emphasis in original). Such political awareness has little to do with denunciation or partisanship. Rather it arises from a palpably sensed problem, a problem shared during the 1960s and 1970s by poets, politicians, and publicists: the problem of how to locate the alchemical equations that might translate the visceral potentials of collective life into generatively inhabitable modes of belonging. This problem of esoteric energies and exoteric forms, viscerally mediated, is at the core of Katrak's work as a poet and a mystic. And it is what binds his esoteric pursuits to his career in advertising.

This might at first sight seem an unlikely claim. When Katrak's verse explicitly mentions his life in advertising, it tends to be in the ironically distanced, even enervated voice that one might expect from a poet of his generation and circumstance. Advertising first appears in "A Letter to Nissim", written in 1963: "So add it up. The advertising job/At twice the money since you left and twice the price. /A trip to London in the spring. The rather nice/Completely tasteful flat" (Katrak 1969a, 13). The tone of Katrak's acknowledgment of the pleasure that he takes in the ripening of his professional and domestic situation is characteristic: an avuncular ceremoniousness interlacing notes of self-mockery, defiance, and regret:

> And then in August
> Getting married to a dear familiar girl
> More loved than loving.
> Warmth, comradeship and affluence on the increase:
> And every care unburdened in a kiss. (13)

If Katrak is to be a poet under these improbably gilded circumstances, then it can no longer be according to Ezekiel's austere prescriptions. Something gained, something lost: "You will no longer bring me to the openness of prayer, /Or say that time for poetry is time enough/ Or talk of craft in your slow voice. You will not make me/A final mouth to love" (13).[9]

Soon enough, both the comforts of the advertising life and the domestic idyll begin to appear as sites of exhaustion in need of spiritual renewal: "Journey to the Winter Solstice (For Keki Daruwalla in Ranikhet)" records a "cheerless prospect: /Client meetings, trips in cars/The usual dinners, a bed grown indolent with habit" (Katrak 1969a, 36–37); "Friends" a world of "Acrid breakfasts, taxis, offices, and whores" (Katrak 1979, 50); and "Rudy von Leyden's Guided Tour" speaks of "endless perspiration and the cries/Of frantic clients" (Katrak 1969b, 12). In "Advertising Executive" (1968a) and "Five Poems on Vanity" (1969b), Katrak, in a conventional way, links the adman's charismatic poise with an underlying spiritual evacuation.

But just as Katrak's politics hardly ever feature overtly in his poetry, so we would, I think, be mistaken to think that the meaning and importance of his advertising practice is only or even primarily registered in those poems where he calls it by that name.

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Significantly, Katrak's most explicitly "political" poem – "Nostradamus (Written During the Indo-Pakistan War)" – not only juxtaposes the esoteric and the exoteric in its title, but was written at the very moment (August 1965) when Katrak was busy setting up MCM, the charismatic experiment in advertising that would both make his name and, in the end, drag it through the dirt. Alongside its more straightforward lamentation over political cynicism ("The enemy was killed/And all our army danced/As Parliament advanced/A popular new bill" [Katrak 1969a, 25]), "Nostradamus" finds Katrak's faith in the decisive potential of occult action renewed by precisely that cutting edge of apparently disenchanted science that brought us the bomb. He addresses the titular 16th-century magus-prophet:

> Everything is magic you said. Today
> I understand this better. The old devices: wand and sword
> Chalice and hieroglyphic letter, no longer seem absurd.
> My present vices multiply and echo
> Your dark inverted sign. Now I believe that words
> And markings, symbols on a page
> May swiftly work a change upon the known
> Visible world of offices and whores. Having seen it happen
> In my own age: not the pentacle inverted or the sacral wine
> But other hieroglyphics no less obscure
> And esoteric than your own: belonging to a sure
> But unconnected other world: space
> In six dimensions, quanta, sub-atomic gods
> The usual apparatus once again: conducting rods
> Wands of sound, ancient maternal shapes
> That now recur – chalices that look like cyclotrons,
> Pile and bomb
> As ominous as a ritual summoning
> Or the opening of tombs. (Katrak 1969a, 23)

Distracted by the worldly seductions of our arts, we forget the power of magic at our peril, leaving it to the merchants of death. W.H. Auden's famous (and soon disowned) exhortation on the eve of World War II – "We must love one another or die" (1940, 100) – has now, Katrak suggests, been supplanted by the need for a more powerful counter-magic, "a ground / Of more than necessary love" (Katrak 1969a, 26) on which inner and outer worlds may be brought into redemptively resonant alignment in a manner once suggested by Nostradamus himself. The "Word of Power" that brings inner and outer worlds into resonance, for the advertising man no less than for the poet or the mystic, may be found in a different discipline, a different *askesis*:

> "By sacrifice the worlds are bound"
> You said and "Everything
> Is magic." Is this the key
> Is this the choice: to start a greater work
> Upon oneself, to find a ground
> Of more than necessary love:
> Oppose the recurring lie
> With the army of our voice: or else to love
> Each other only a little before we die? (Katrak 1969a, 26)

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"Nostradamus" marks a turning point for Katrak. It's the moment when the elements move into alignment that will, by 1971, see Katrak, at the very peak of his powers, emerge in the persona of "the Bhikshu" – the monk-magician, at once yogi and *bhogi*.[10] But it is also, startlingly, the poem in which Katrak, in addressing the prophet, seems to prophesy his own undoing: the slow slide from grace that will begin, amid defiant gestures, in 1972:

> If now we may believe
> The last quatrains as true. If the hot and unknown solstice
> Of seventy two contains the day we fear;
> The doors have shut at least and our reprieve
> Foreclosed to seven years. (Katrak 1969a, 26)

One senses in several of the poems written between 1965 and 1967 the emergence of the constellation under which Katrak would move into his most prolific phase as a poet (1970–72) and, during those very same years, his most spectacular success as an adman. At the same time, the intimations of a self-loss that, unlike the oceanic drowning of "A Bend in the Middle of the Road", promises no glorious rebirth, begin to appear as early as "The Moving On" (1969). The poem, left out of Katrak's collections, describes the family leaving their former home in order to move into the magnificence of Bakhtavar, the site of MCM's glory years but also, in the end, the site of the Bhikshu's death:

> As I walked down, "Kersy" she said and "Kersy"
> I glanced behind with something much like shame
> But it was gone, all gone, I could not remember
> The old life. Could not recall my name. (Katrak 1969c, 12)

One of Katrak's finest comic poems, "How the Bhikshu Was Born", appeared in early 1974. As if satirizing the grandiosity of his own persona, Katrak hijacks, on behalf of his alter ego, not only his own birth, not only the lives of his parents, but nothing less than the evolution of intelligent life on earth to serve as the prehistory of the Bhikshu's reluctant and, after such operatic preliminaries, rather anticlimactic emergence:

> It's a boy said Dr Kerawala.
> There lay Bhikshu
> Infant, bulbous, for the first time speechless,
> With the World not saved
> And Bombay a little
> Dirtier than usual. (Katrak 1979, 11–13)[11]

The comedy of the piece disguises much darker intimations. For if Katrak was willing, however playfully, to merge the Bhikshu's birth with his own, then by early 1974 he was also acutely aware of the imminence of the grim visitor that he would describe in "Deaths" in 1979, ending the Bhikshu's apparently charmed life on the top floors of Bakhtavar with the demise of MCM:

> When Death came to Bhikshu
> He wore no Halloween mask,
> He was no Mexican sugar skull,
> He came loping through no maggotfields
> His tatters waving, his scythe askew,
> He wore no grin.
>
> He walked around the Colaba bread shop
> He simply asked the way.

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Nine floors up he knocked and said
This is it baby.
Tomorrow your luverly shop is ruined,
Day after your wife will sicken,
Tuesdays your daughters twitch
Or whore, take your pick.
Today I will suck your blood
I shall fuck you with lawsuits. (Katrak 1979, 14)

Patel (2015) remembers Katrak, at the height of his glory years, describing his luxurious perch in Bakhtavar as "Olympian". Others close to Katrak in later years relate that he continued, for many years after the collapse of MCM, to bear the burden not only of the enormous debts that the agency had amassed, but also of the memory of the hubris that had brought about his downfall. But during the brief peak years, MCM seemed unstoppable.

Joyful, even reckless confidence radiates from Katrak's literary writing during this period. Never had he published so prolifically, never had the poems been so ambitious in form and in theme. His magus-ego, the Bhikshu (sometimes the Bhikshu K), embodies this sense of limitless vital potential: "The Gates of Strength/Swing Wide. All Trees of Life/Burn in your hand. All things are possible" (Katrak 1971a, 23). And yet one cannot make a conditional deal with the unconditional. One cannot insist on economy or equivalence on the grounds of a more than necessary love. A true magician must be in control of his own demons. The Bhikshu's young daughter Maia asks him, at bedtime, whether witches and magic are real. "Never mind about real", the Bhikshu sighs exasperatedly, wondering why everyone thinks he has answers to such questions. "They seem real enough when you bring off a proper confrontation. And never mind about *objective*", he continues, slipping inward. "There are enough real monsters in the deeps of our own soul to have to worry about looking for them outside. […] Real magic demands the whole man, paunch, weak knees and all" (Katrak, 1971a, 23). Above all, it demands an almost superhuman detachment. Couliano observes that the manipulator of phantasms must take special care himself to remain indifferent to their seductions. He quotes the 16th-century Italian magus, Giordano Bruno: "Be careful not to change yourself from manipulator into the tool of phantasms" (quoted in Couliano 1987, 92). The Bhikshu's tragedy is that he is fully aware of the danger – and equally conscious of his inability to resist.

By early 1972, even as the Bhikshu's potency as adman and poet was at its peak, the crisis was upon him. Domestic comforts gave way, in the passage of a few short months, to isolation, fury and illness.

In "The End of Winter", he rails defiantly, for all the world like Shakespeare's exiled magus-king Prospero, from his rustic bayside perch at Alibagh, across the water from business-as-usual Bombay. His latest theatricality is, ostensibly, a farewell to theatricality: "Do not mistake me/Because you have known me for fifteen years do not mistake/This for another mise en scene, /Convenient juxtaposition of inner and outer landscape".[12] "Two brothers, two now distant friends from my buried paleolithic" travel across the water from Bombay to offer the tarnished and apparently delusional Bhikshu a disinfecting deal: "With pink laved hands they offered me Dettol: /You have soiled your hands they said/There is mud on your hands from too much digging/For imaginary gold" (Katrak 1979, 24–25). The Bhikshu is offered a safe settlement, "a gift of climacteric", a chance to see reason, to back down and to give up his magic:

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They offered me the fruits of intellect and sanity
Of a well guarded life that turns its back on death.
Do not return as you are they said
You will be disaccredited, all manner of men
Will hound you they said. Wash your hands
Return to mathematics
Go back to poetry
Welcome to the new social sciences
We will give you computers they said,
Great respectability to your now insane highness;
Room on the boards of many advertising agencies,
A change of life, a gift of climacteric.
They walked me on the beach like a dog. (Katrak 1979, 25)

Struggling now on the divided stage of his own subjectivity, the Bhikshu reaches more explicitly than ever for a theatrical simile: precisely the outsize personality of Katrak the adman will become the cover: "remember to dissemble/A fine megalomania" (Katrak 1979, 28). Such a disciplined performance of Katrak's "real life" will protect the secret locus of the Bhikshu's truth – the poetry that everyone will assume is "only" fictional:

Remember if you do not wish to lose
Even your few remaining friends, keep your disguises,
Continue to drive your sports car,
Justify nothing, joke as usual. As for your truth,
Indulge in the harmless pastime of writing verse.
There all is metaphor, all will be taken
For the same old lies. (28)

"Poems from an Immurement" finds Katrak's protagonist sequestered in a hospital ward, bills and rumors hammering at his walls. The direct connection between esoteric and exoteric potency that defines the Bhikshu has turned, disastrously, into a short circuit: "I shall return/Meanwhile/Me erectile muscles is ruined/Bank balance leaks" (Katrak 1972a, 25). And no one has a clearer or more ruthless diagnosis of the Bhikshu's malady than the man in whose name he has performed his public magic: as he says in "The Descent":

This is the result
Of years of joyful constipation
Gathering light to oneself, living off
People's blood, shining like a tarnished sun
And labeling the buffoon Kersy. (Katrak 1972a, 25)

"Kersy" dreams of escape – "I would like to let go" – but everything conspires to pin him to his name, a name that, as in "The Conspiracy", no longer seems attached to an entity able to act:

Wilt not leave me alone? Friends
With current gossip, letters addressed to a name
Unmistakably mine, flowers for me,
My medicines arriving on the dot, injections in my buttock
Urine specimens that claim me,
Bacterial cultures, cardiograms, telegrams,
Screaming Kersy. A hundred penumbrae
Insistent on my identity? (Katrak 1972b, 26)

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Even here, at the very edge of despair, the crumbling Bhikshu turns, with ironic theatricality, to his public:

> Are motives tolerable? Audience captive?
> Has't learnt to put up with me like old wife
> Predictable at tea?
> Nevertheless:
> Onwards! (26)

In the end, he confronts a world-immanence that, once alive with magical potential, is now utterly inert:

> It is here. It is everyday mind.
> Not withdrawn. It is world seen with corporeal eye
> Where wives are wives, whores, whores
> Lawsuits, lawsuits.
> After affirmation's forgotten, poets silenced,
> Mystics dead. It is here. Like grilled steak for lunch,
> Bank cheques bouncing, dull patch of wall, old gumboots;
>
> O most Holy, O Love of the World
> It shines. (28)

The "reprieve/Foreclosed to seven years" in 1965 was now over. After this torrent of writings, culminating in the febrile period between 1970 and 1972, Katrak would only publish one more poem, "How the Bhikshu Was Born", before the collapse of MCM in 1975. Its companion piece, "Deaths", which equated the end of MCM with the Bhikshu's demise, was one of only two new poems to appear in *Underworld* (Katrak 1979). Its final lines suggest something of the situation Katrak found himself in during the late 1970s, when he was struggling to find equanimity amid the hurricane of recrimination that his agency's failure brought upon him. Adil Jussawalla recalls Katrak during this period remarking that appearing in court was like being punched in the face on an everyday basis (2015). And indeed "Deaths" ends on a pugilistic note: "Abandon hope: says Bhikshu/Trust in the Void. /In a magical world/Use your fists" (Katrak 1979, 15).

> Surprise surprise:
> Dream cursed,
> Life reversed! (Katrak 1984, 22)

The year 1976, although it fell in the midst of Mrs Gandhi's experiment with dictatorship, was, as Sarang (1989) notes, something of an annus mirabilis for Indian poetry in English. But Kersy Katrak was keeping a low profile; some say that he even shaved off his beard to evade detection on the streets of Bombay. In 1982, he would look back:

> I was then not fully in the picture, so to speak. The collapse of my advertising agency had left me sitting in a corner, licking real wounds, inflicted by lack of funds, a plague of lawsuits and a steady stream of personal hatred, […] sometimes disguised as benign concern and often from quite unexpected quarters. [… M]y reading in those days being confined by necessity to the study of company law. (Katrak 1982a, 40)

At the end of 1979, Katrak and his wife joined a handful of other couples in a residential experiment at Ashishda's ashram at Mirtola. During his four years of exile and recovery there, Katrak would write the poems that comprised his final collection, *Purgatory*.

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Where Katrak's verse had, during the Bhikshu's rise and fall in the early 1970s, grown increasingly florid and declamatory, the poems in *Purgatory* have been whittled down to the barest essentials. Each one is titled only with a number. The metric schemes are as simple as possible, reminiscent of nursery rhymes or children's prayers, opening up the resonant lexical materiality of chant. Katrak's new resistance to ornament conveys the extraordinary physical and spiritual exertion demanded by full-time life at Mirtola, a regimen all the more challenging for the man who, whatever his other potencies, had been "unable to catch a bus or cook an egg".[13]

The most spirited lines in *Purgatory* are not the ones that reach for *tattva* – for "That by which green is green" (Katrak 1984, 26), as the poem "Eighteen" puts it – but rather the ones in which Katrak derives some comic theatre out of the very spectacle of his self-abasement, as in "Twentyeight":

> Here are your windows all agleam,
> Here is your chimney swept;
> Here is your floor so nice and clean;
> That puddle is where I wept.
> Here are my eyes all astream,
> But the kitchen is looking like a dream.
> Now can I come up and talk
> About Sufis and stuff?
>
> Fuck off! (Katrak 1984, 37)

By the time *Purgatory* was published in 1984, Katrak had moved back to Bombay and, although he was barred from running his own agency, had rejoined the advertising business in a consultative capacity. Until Ashishda's death in 1997, Katrak continued, as had been his practice since the mid 1960s, to spend several weeks each year at Mirtola, where Usha, initially skeptical, had set up a permanent home. But for the last 22 years of his life, he published no new poems. After *Purgatory*, Katrak continued to work in advertising, rejoining Lintas in the late 1980s and, in a final spurt of creative energy, co-founding the Republic Agency in 2002 with his daughter Maia, who still runs the agency today.

The former Bhikshu had clearly reached a settlement with himself "And found at last a way to live / With his own face" (Katrak 1969b, 22). This meant not just an end to poetry, but also, and by the same token, a farewell to the magical resonances that at one time had allowed the poetry, the acting, the devotions and the advertising to partake of the same powers. Katrak may have gone back to advertising but, after the death of the Bhikshu, it was never quite the same. As he told me in an interview in May 1998:

> When I was in MCM, advertising was my life. Now advertising is the way I make money. It's my profession; it's not my life. In fact, I'm bored by advertising now. It's a way of earning my bread. And my butter and my jam. But it's nothing else. And I'm good at it, because I've been at it long enough. That's all. (Katrak 1998)[14]

Katrak's return to advertising in the early 1980s coincided with the expansion of commercial television in India. As an English-language press-based copywriter, Katrak was thus, in this newly populist and increasingly Indian-language advertising climate, something of a man out of time, a missing person for a third time. The accusation that had all along been leveled at the Indian poets writing in English – that their work amounted, in Jeet Thayil's

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(2008) ironic characterization, to a failure of national consciousness – was now, with some regularity, being thrown at the advertising giants of the 1960s.

Katrak remained an extraordinary judge and inciter of others' talents. But whereas, during his Olympian period in the early 1970s, he epitomized the charismatic core of Bombay advertising, in the 1980s and 1990s, Katrak's charisma survived, as it were, in quotation marks. He was now "Kersy Katrak, the legend of the creative revolution", obliged to perform himself. To be professionally riveted to his old self in this way must have been particularly difficult for a man who had prided himself, in his poetry and in his advertising work, first on exercising the self and, later, on exorcising it.

If I were to choose an epitaph for Katrak from among his own lines, I would pick the following, from "A Bend in the Middle of the Road (This Poem for Usha)", written in 1966, in his 30th year:

> Able at last to love.
> Dispossessed at last of waste
> Ambition, art and poetry.
>
> Coming home one evening through much the usual door:
> I found it open. (Katrak 1969a, 35)

Notes

1. For a different and longer version of this article, see my introduction to Katrak (2016).
2. We do learn a great deal about Katrak as a poet from his own, often very fine, writings on other poets – as well as from his wickedly funny pastiches of his contemporaries (see Katrak 1965, 1966a, 1966b, 1968b, 1982a, 1982b, 1983).
3. I use the terms "esoteric" and "exoteric" throughout this article to refer, respectively, to the inner or latent as opposed to the outer or manifest dimensions of life. Both the work of art and the work of advertising depend on actualizing inner or latent potentials in the shared substance of social life.
4. Katrak chose to read "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" at the memorial service held for Arun Kolatkar at the Kala Ghoda Festival in 2005. His own service would be held in the same venue three years later.
5. Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921): richly bearded Russian anarchist thinker and activist.
6. A popular household antiseptic.
7. Katrak was an active participant in Alkazi's Theatre Unit, founded in 1954 as a successor to Sultan "Bobby" Padamsee's Theatre Group. Alkazi directed several productions in which Katrak played against his future wife, including Lorca's *Yerma* and Euripides' *Medea*. More generally, Bombay's English-language theater scene was, in the 1950s and 1960s, a gathering point for many young actors who would go on to be major players in the Bombay advertising world, including Alyque Padamsee, the da Cunha brothers (Gerson and Sylvester), Bharat Dabholkar, Roger Pereira, Homi Daruwalla and others.
8. Sri Madhava Ashish (1920–97), born Alexander Phipps in Edinburgh, came to India as an aircraft engineer during World War II. Following the war, he embarked on a spiritual quest that eventually brought him to the ashram at Mirtola, near Almora in the Kumaon foothills, where he took a vow of renunciation and became a devotee of founder Sri Yashoda Ma and her disciple Sri Krishna Prem. Following the latter's death in 1965, Ashishda took over the ashram, which is where Katrak met him for the first time the following year. For more on Ashishda's life and teachings, see Ginsburg (2001).
9. Katrak first joined advertising in 1959, after returning from a period spent in London.

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10. If the yogi is the one who submits to the *askesis* of a discipline, then the *bhogi* is the "enjoyer, sensualist" (Madan 1987, 10). Katrak's own definition of "bhikshu" is calculatedly unassuming: "A Buddhist monk. One committed to the Buddhist Way or simply to The Way" (Katrak and Katrak 1971, 29).
11. "How the Bhikshu Was Born" (1974) reappeared in *Underworld* as "Births" (Katrak 1979, 11–13).
12. This from a section of "The End of Winter" (Katrak 1972b, 16) that would not reappear in "Chairmen". In the transition to "Chairmen", other telling excisions include the removal of MCM colleague Indira Dhody's name from the line "Nissim Ezekiels, Indira Dhodys, philistines and poets" (16; compare Katrak 1979, 22). Similarly, "Persephone. In the Heavens at Midnight" has lost the word "adman" when the poem reappears in *Underworld* as "Auras".
13. Vivid descriptions of the rigors and rewards of resident life at Mirtola may be found in Pandey (2003) and Tandan (1997).
14. This 1998 interview was, sadly, the only time I met Katrak. At the time, I was conducting my PhD fieldwork on the Mumbai advertising business and had been referred to Katrak as a legend from the old days. I had no idea that he was a poet.

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Acknowledgements

Over the years, many people have generously shared with me their memories of Kersy Katrak and their thoughts on the life and times of MCM. I look forward to acknowledging their individual contributions in the longer work of which the present article is a preliminary part. For reflections that found their way into the present article I would like to express my gratitude to Shyam Benegal, Dilip Bhende, Sylvester da Cunha, Maia Katrak, Mohammed Khan, Ashok Kurien, Alyque Padamsee and Goutam Rakshit. I want to thank Laetitia Zecchini and Anjali Nerlekar for giving me the occasion to think about Katrak's poetry; Adil Jussawalla, Gieve Patel and Keki Daruwalla for taking the time to remember and reflect on the predicaments of poetry; Sean Mahoney and Sy Ginsburg for helping me take baby steps in esoteric worlds; and Maia, Usha and Kersy Katrak for speaking so fearlessly about the places where the personal meets the professional. This article is dedicated to Usha Katrak, who passed away on December 12, 2015, just as I was finishing the penultimate draft.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

William Mazzarella is Neukom Family Professor of Anthropology at the University of Chicago. His books include *Shoveling Smoke: Advertising and Globalization in Contemporary India* (2003), *Censorium: Cinema and the Open Edge of Mass Publicity* (2013) and *The Mana of Mass Society* (2017). He is also the editor of *K.D. Katrak: Collected Poems* (2016) and, with Raminder Kaur, the co-editor of *Censorship in South Asia: Cultural Regulation from Sedition to Seduction* (2009).

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